

A young man and woman are shown in a romantic embrace, nearly kissing. The man, on the left, has short brown hair and is wearing a red jacket over a white hoodie. The woman, on the right, has long red hair and is wearing a grey jacket over a white hoodie. They are standing in front of a wooden fence. The overall tone is warm and intimate.

HIDE & SEEK

by
Alessa

Hide and Seek

by Alessa

I let out a tired sigh as I finished clearing off a towering pile of dishes, only to be greeted by the clamour of a new group of students entering the restaurant. Their raucous laughter pierced through the air, echoing off the walls and causing a pang of dread to settle in my chest. This was a familiar scene—one that always left me exhausted and mentally preparing for the aftermath.

With a sense of urgency, I hastened to the cutlery drawer, grabbing utensils to re-set the table. Though I genuinely enjoyed my work, dealing with students as customers was an entirely different challenge altogether. Their careless nature often left in their wake a trail of chaos that could rival the destruction of whole cities. And as if that weren't enough, their tips were usually as meagre as their manners, leaving me with a mountain of effort for very little reward. Yet, as I glanced towards the hostess desk, Megan's beckoning gesture made it clear that I didn't have much of a choice. I begrudgingly understood—she wanted me to seat them.

I nodded in acknowledgement and made my way towards them, mentally bracing myself for the impending whirlwind of voices. As I approached, I could already hear their animated chatter drowning out the surrounding ambience. There were seven of them, all young women, their energy radiating with an effervescence that felt worlds away from my own reserved nature. I mustered up the courage to raise my voice above their clamour, projecting a confidence I didn't truly possess.

"Hello, my name is Erin," I spoke up, my voice blending with the echo of their conversation. "I'll be your waitress today. If you could please follow me right this way..." I motioned towards a secluded booth at the back of the restaurant, hoping to tame their exuberance in a more secluded spot. To my surprise, they fell in line behind me, their laughter dimming as they obediently trailed along. A few disapproving glances from the older patrons reminded me of the stark contrast between their boisterous presence and the calm atmosphere the restaurant usually upholds.

Finally, as we reached the booth, I distributed the menus, which were stacked against my hip. Each one grabbed for a menu, their fingers eagerly flipping through the plastic-lined pages.

"I'll let you decide on your choices," I began, ready to take their orders and move swiftly through the process. However, before I could make my exit, one of them interrupted me with a confident tone.

"No, it's fine. We'll order now. We're starving. Everybody knows what they want, right?" Her words were met with a chorus of agreements and laughter, filling the air with their shared anticipation.

"Oh, okay," I responded, relieved that they were eager to expedite the ordering process. A small smile tugged at the corners of my lips as I reached for my notepad, hastily jotting down 'Girl 1' at the top to keep track of their requests.

"And what can I get for you this evening?" I asked, directing my attention to the first girl who caught my eye.

She glanced briefly down at the menu, her gaze returning to me with confidence. "I'll have the chicken and potato dinner with the Caesar salad... and a Heineken beer." A wave of approval rippled through the table, and I couldn't help but wonder if they were celebrating something special.

"Anything else for you, Miss?" I inquired, shifting my focus to the next girl in line. She shook her head, and a girl wearing a red sweatshirt with braided hair leaned forward, eager to have her turn.

"I'm next!" she exclaimed with a burst of energy. "Alright, I'll take the steak dinner, and I'd like to swap the corn for French fries. Please bring me a Greek salad, but keep the dressing on the side. No olives and no feta cheese. Oh, and I'd also like—"

"What the hell is the point of that? Greek without feta?" A girl in a cardigan interjected, her disbelief evident in her tone.

"You order like your mom," another girl chimed in, followed by a round of snickers from the table.

"Shut up!" the girl in the red sweatshirt retorted, undeterred. "As I was saying, I'll take one of those little bread rolls as well, with butter on the side..."

"She'd like that in a lunch box," a high-pitched voice interrupted, triggering another wave of laughter from the group. The speaker, adorned in a purple T-shirt and shoulder-length blonde hair, had captivating blue eyes that instantly ignited a spark within me.

The electric jolt surged through my veins, momentarily robbing me of breath. Those eyes—I would recognise them anywhere. It was *her*. My heart raced, thoughts spiralling into a whirlwind as my body succumbed to a sudden warmth that washed over me. I had to divert my gaze.

No.

This can't be happening. Not now, not like this. How can she still have this effect on me after all these years? I was just a little girl. This is ridiculous.

"Did you get the last part?" the girl in the red sweatshirt asked, her voice bringing me back to the present. My head snapped up, and I could feel my cheeks burning as I realised they were all looking at me, awaiting my response.

"Yes, of course," I managed to say, feigning confidence as I pretended to jot something down in my notepad. The weight of her gaze intensified, and the rush of embarrassment flooded my face. My hand trembled, and my pulse raced erratically within my chest. Thinking clearly became a challenge, let alone concentrating on the task at hand. It didn't seem fair. Feeling like this was something I had always despised, even back then. Her mere presence reduced me to a crumbling mess.

"A—and for you, Miss?" I stammered, turning my attention to another girl and attempting to regain my composure.

She recited her order, and I methodically wrote it down, doing my best to avoid the eyes fixated on me. The rest of the girls followed suit, listing their preferences one by one, and I kept my head down, responding curtly and doing everything I could to delay the inevitable encounter. But I couldn't avoid her forever. When the time came to address her, it took every ounce of effort within me to lift my head and meet her gaze directly. My palms became sweaty, and I shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, feeling the weight of the past and the present converging in this one moment.

"And f—for you?" I managed to utter, my voice barely more than a whisper.

"I'll have the pizza and a coke," she replied with a smile. It hit me like a bolt of lightning, instantly throwing me back ten years when those lips curved upwards in the exact same way, and she waved at me across the playground. She blinked, and my focus was drawn back to her eyes—blue and searing. Exactly as I had remembered them.

"What... would you like on your pizza?" I inquired, quickly averting my gaze once again. Maintaining eye contact with a girl like her was challenging. It assaulted every one of my senses, overwhelming me to the point where I could barely form a sentence, let alone engage in a meaningful conversation.

"Just cheese," she said.

"Okay," I managed to say, scribbling her order onto my notepad. When I gathered the courage to look up again, she was engrossed in conversation with the girl beside her, and a sudden pang of realisation hit me—she didn't recognise me. The knowledge came as a shock, jolting my heart. Though I had feared her reaction, I hadn't even considered the possibility of being forgotten. Why would I assume that my impact on her was anything close to the effect she had on me? Of course, she had grown up, lived her life, done things. Why would a little girl on a camp playground stick in her memory? I swallowed the hurt, trying to push it aside, as I busily gathered and stacked up the menus.

"Just ask for me if you need anything else," I muttered, my words lost in the sea of their lively conversation. None of them were paying attention. They were engrossed in animated chatter about end-of-semester exams. With a heavy heart, I slowly retreated, walking away, determined not to dwell on what had just transpired. I couldn't help but feel a hint of disapproval towards her friends, but who was I to judge who she chose to spend time with? In my memory, she had been quieter, sweeter, and very artistic. I suddenly remembered the necklace that still lay at the bottom of my sock drawer. I blushed again, shaking my head.

I was being ridiculous. If she couldn't remember me, she would never recall giving me that necklace. And why should she remember me? Out of all the places and circumstances to encounter her again, it had to be here? At work? In this... environment? I glanced down at my standard uniform of black pants and a blue shirt, emblazoned with the restaurant's logo underneath my collar. It was hardly an outfit one would pick to meet their long-lost love.

Love.

I couldn't help but snort and place the menus under the hostess desk. Pathetic, that's what I had become—romanticising memories from my childhood with her. What did I truly understand about love at eleven? Or even twelve, for that matter? Absolutely nothing.

I took a deep breath and ran a hand through my dishevelled hair. I caught a blurry glimpse of my reflection in the polished black tiles lining the lobby walls, and it was far from comforting. My cheeks were still flushed, and strands of brown hair had pulled loose from their braid. My makeup seemed to have evaporated, leaving me looking as if I had rolled out of bed just minutes ago. I couldn't remember the last time I looked worse.

A gentle nudge on my shoulder brought me back to the present, and I looked up to see Megan, the reminder of my duty awaiting me. "Your table needs you," she informed me.

"Oh?" I replied, already dreading my return. She didn't remember me. I didn't need another reminder. Just looking at her was hard enough.

"They mentioned something about appetisers," Megan continued. "I'm not sure, but you better go check. Maybe you forgot to write it down."

"Probably," I muttered without thinking, catching myself as she gave me a disapproving look. I quickly moved away before she could question me any further.

Each step I took towards the table was reminiscent of a march to the gallows. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end the closer I got, my pulse racing once again. Her effect on me was utterly exhausting, but it was a force I couldn't seem to fight. I had never encountered anyone, before or since, who had evoked even half of the emotions she stirred within me.

As I approached the table, the girl with the braided hair stared at me pointedly, and I was suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of embarrassment.

"Did I forget something?" I nervously inquired, feeling a twinge of anxiety.

"We ordered garlic sticks to start off," she replied, her annoyance evident in her tone.

"Oh, right," I hastily responded. "I'm sorry, I must have missed that. I'll get those for you right away."

"Erin?" a voice suddenly called out.

In the entirety of my life, I had never experienced a moment more nerve-wracking than the eight seconds of silence which followed that question. I was frozen in place, my heart pounding against my ribs. Tentatively, I gathered the courage to raise my head, meeting the full force of her piercing blue eyes as they critically observed me, as though trying to piece together the puzzle of my identity.

"Erin... Collins?" she asked, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

"Yes," I replied, my voice barely above a whisper. "Uh... Natalie?"

"Wow!" she exclaimed, her eyes immediately lighting up as a radiant smile spread across her face. "I haven't seen you in years!"

"Who is this?" the girl with the braided hair asked, her curiosity piqued.

"We met at camp," Natalie explained, and somehow, the careless way her answer summed up two magic summers made my heart sink. Yes, we had met at camp. But it had been so much more than that. At least to me.

"Which camp?" A girl in a blue jacket interjected, genuinely intrigued.

"Rowlands Camp," I answered without thinking, the memories flooding back without a second thought.

"That was it!" Natalie exclaimed, her smile still bright, her blue eyes still gleaming. "Can't believe it. I don't think that place even exists anymore."

"Oh yeah, I remember that. My sister went there. They shut it down a few years ago," the girl in the blue jacket added, hijacking the conversation.

The revelation of the camp's closure felt like another small piece of my heart breaking, a pang of nostalgia mingling with the present reality. Yet, in that moment, I couldn't help but be drawn into the warmth emanating from Natalie's smile, even if it was mixed with a tinge of wistfulness.

The conversation quickly shifted away from me as they delved into discussing the rumours surrounding the camp's closure. It felt impersonal, detached from the memories I held dear. Somehow I didn't feel comfortable revealing my memories of those summers like this, at a table full of strangers, or with a certain blue-eyed girl who evidently viewed those long-ago days with nothing more than curious interest.

"I'll be right back with those garlic sticks," I blurted out, eager to escape the situation. I was a mess as I made a hasty retreat to the kitchen counter, finding solace in the chaotic surroundings. So she did remember me, but what did that mean? I was just a fragment of a childhood memory. And that's exactly how it should be. What right do I have to expect anything more?

I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut tightly. Only one more hour left of my shift. If I was lucky, they would eat slowly, sparing me from having to present their bill or even endure hearing her say goodbye to me. I couldn't handle another goodbye. Not like the last time.

I put on my best poker face as I placed the garlic sticks on the table, even though I could feel Natalie's full attention on me. Now that she knew who I was, her scrutiny became evident. I lifted my gaze briefly, and she responded with a smile. Then, unexpectedly, she winked at me.

No!

Without uttering a word, I swiftly spun away from the table, my heart pounding in my chest. What was happening to me? I wasn't twelve anymore. How could a simple wink from her send me spiralling over the edge in the exact same way a wave of her hand had back then? It was like a repeat of everything she had used to capture my heart. This was insane.

I burst through the door of the ladies' room, ignoring the startled gasp of a woman who was powdering her nose in front of the mirror. She hastily packed up her belongings as I erratically tugged at my hair,

releasing it from its braid. When it was loose, I turned on the taps with trembling hands and splashed cold water over my face, hoping to regain some composure. I needed to get a grip. This couldn't continue. If I spent even one more minute in her presence, I would be up for the following week daydreaming of everything that could have been. And I had already done that. For years.

I let out a sigh, closing my eyes tightly, feeling a wave of embarrassment wash over me. How had it taken me so long to move on from her? Far too long. And it was over. It had always been over. There was nothing left to salvage. We had been nothing more than children.

I recalled the two times she had kissed me—once beneath the shade of an apple tree and once during a game of hide and seek. The camp counsellors had allowed us to play in the wooded area, and I could still vividly remember crouching behind a bush, my heart racing, when I felt the warmth of her body nestling next to mine. She had flashed that same mischievous grin, and I couldn't help but blush at our close proximity. Then, with a surge of boldness, she had leaned in, her hand gently cupping my cheek as her lips met mine. When she'd pulled back, her eyes were dancing.

"I hope they don't find us yet," she had whispered, teasing and playful.

I had nodded, my heart fluttering, and offered a shy smile in response. Her hand had slipped into mine, and we had remained there, silent and breathless, our connection unspoken, as we listened to the excited shouts of the other children being discovered.

And then, in those fleeting moments before I'd seen a pair of green sneakers rush towards our hiding place, she had leaned closer towards me, gently brushing the strands of hair away from my ear.

"I like you," she had confessed, and I had turned to look at her, my eyes wide. For that brief instant, her usually bright blue eyes had dimmed, revealing a rare glimpse of uncertainty. Looking back, I realised how brave she had been in that moment, mustering the courage to reveal her true feelings. Her next words had trembled, carrying a mix of vulnerability and quiet hope.

"Do you... like me?"

But I had never answered her.

My wide-eyed gaze had been fixed upon her. I had wanted to answer, wanted to express the emotions swirling inside me, but before I could find the right words, the rustle of the green sneakers had rushed up, shattering the fragile moment, and a freckled face had parted the leaves of the bush.

"Found you!"

And just like that, the enchantment we had shared was broken. She hadn't asked me again, and I hadn't found the opportunity to answer. The interruption had sealed our silence, leaving our unspoken feelings suspended in the air between us.

As I reflected on our past interactions, a sense of realisation washed over me. Perhaps Natalie had felt rejected back then. Maybe she believed that I hadn't reciprocated her feelings at all. But that couldn't be entirely true. I had made my fondness for her quite obvious. She couldn't have doubted that... could she?

Startled by my immersion in memories, I realised that I had lost track of time. As I exited the washroom, I collided with Megan, who wore a look of stress and urgency.

"Erin! Where have you been? I need you at table thirty-six. It's a group of twenty-three. Amanda will take over for you at table four. We need all the help we can get."

I looked at her, momentarily stunned that my brief, embarrassing escapade had abruptly come to an end. Table thirty-six was located on the opposite side of the restaurant, meaning I had no reason to return and see her again or even say goodbye. Which I hadn't wanted to do anyway. But still, it was difficult to have that option taken away from me.

"Does Amanda know all their orders?" I asked, trying to think up a reason to go back.

"Yes, she got them," Megan said dismissively. "Now hurry up! Table thirty-six is hungry. We've got two waitresses on it already. It's some kind of family reunion. They're all very picky."

I nodded and walked away with a sinking feeling in my heart. Well, it's over now. I suppose I'd rather have seen her than not at all. After all, she knew my name. What more could I possibly ask for?

The remainder of the evening dragged on slowly. While rushing back and forth with the orders for table thirty-six, I intermittently caught snippets of boisterous laughter resonating through the restaurant from their table. Each burst of mirth felt like a small dagger, leaving me with a peculiar sense of rejection, as if she hadn't even noticed my absence. Of course, I had no concrete evidence to support such a notion. It was just a nagging feeling that lingered within me.

Finally, as I rang in the bill for the large group of twenty-three, Amanda approached me, her arms piled up with a stack of dirty dishes.

"Why didn't Megan tell me your table was so entertaining? Best shift I've had in ages!" She laughed. "When are you done?"

"In five minutes," I said, the relief in my voice apparent. "My table was so demanding. They returned everything at least once."

"Family reunions," Amanda said understandingly. "They're always a pain. Well, have a good night! See you tomorrow, Erin!"

"You too," I replied, exhausted.

After retrieving my belongings from the staff room and receiving a measly three-dollar tip from table thirty-six, I made my way towards the back exit. The back entrance led to an empty parking lot reserved for the restaurant's staff, where I had parked my car.

"Erin?" a voice called my name as I stepped through the metal door into the back lot.

I jumped, startled, as her blue eyes connected with mine.

"W—what...?" I began.

"That girl, Amanda, I asked her when you'd be done with your shift," Natalie grinned.

"Oh," I answered, flustered. That explained why she'd asked me.

"She told me you'd come out this way, so I thought I'd wait," she said. "I heard you got traded to another table. I was thinking you'd left me on purpose," she said, giving me the mischievous look I remembered so well.

"Oh... uh, no, they just... they just trade you sometimes... if it gets really busy..." I mumbled.

"I missed you, Erin," she cut me off, saving me from further embarrassing myself. "I wanted to catch up. Do you have anywhere to be? Can you stay for a bit?"

I looked at her, standing there so confidently, her hands tucked comfortably into the pockets of her coat. How does she exude such self-assurance?

"S—sure, of course," I stammered, starting to walk towards my car. She fell into step beside me, our footsteps falling in sync.

"Camp Rowlands," she said reminiscently. "That really took me back. To be honest, at first I didn't recognise you at all. I thought I saw you once, several years ago, in a caffè downtown, but I was never sure."

"You did?" I asked, suddenly intrigued.

"But now I don't think it was you," Natalie said. "You're taller than I remember."

I laughed nervously. "I guess I am."

"And your hair is different," she said, looking at me contemplatively. "It's darker."

A deep blush crept up my cheeks, intensified by the blunt force of her gaze and the unmistakable appraisal of my appearance. I struggled to find a coherent response to her question.

"Yeah," I answered lamely, unsure of how to respond. How could I articulate what I truly wanted to say? I wanted to tell her that she looked even more stunning than I remembered, that every detail of her was perfection, and that being near her still took my breath away and left me giddy with emotion. But those words remained locked inside, unspoken. I could never say that; at least not aloud.

"Do I look the same?" she suddenly asked, as though she could read my thoughts. "When you first approached our table, your expression changed, and you looked at me like you knew me. That's what made me realise who you were."

"Was I that obvious?" I responded, embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

She observed me in silence for a moment before an unexpected smile graced her lips. "You still blush in the same way," she remarked.

If it were possible, my cheeks flushed an even deeper shade of red. We had reached my car, and I fumbled clumsily for my keys, my nervousness palpable in my actions.

She cast an appreciative glance towards the vehicle. "Is it yours?" she inquired.

"Yeah, I bought it last winter," I replied, my voice betraying a mixture of pride and insecurity.

"It's nice," she said. "Wish I could say the same. I'm still driving my dad's old clunker. It works, though. Gets me from A to B."

"Really?" I asked, genuinely surprised, my apprehension momentarily forgotten. "You always said you wanted a sports car. You planned to use it to chase down the ice cream truck, steal all the cones, and then race away when the cops came after you," I recalled, grinning in spite of myself.

She burst into laughter. "Did I say that? I was a crazy kid. I'd love to have a sports car. My wallet couldn't handle it, though."

"You also mentioned wanting to live in a house made of gingerbread. You insisted that your bed would be made of candy so that whenever you couldn't sleep, you could simply munch on your sheets and pillows," I added, the memories flooding back.

Her laughter filled the air once again. "What a genius idea! I should have invested in that when I had the chance."

"Oh no," I corrected with a playful tone. "You didn't want to buy it. You wanted me to build it. You saw me make that noodle craft one day and decided my artistic skills were more than sufficient to create your dream house."

"So, you were my chosen builder, huh?"

"Yep," I nodded, unable to suppress my own smile. "And you made sure to specify that the front door had to be made of chocolate."

"Well, I must say, I had excellent taste even back then," she replied, a hint of nostalgia colouring her words.

There was a momentary pause as her words hung in the air, and once again, I found myself blushing at the depth of our shared memories.

As a gust of wind swept past us, tousling her golden locks, I couldn't help but steal glances in her direction. I tried not to stare, but found myself examining the way she stood, with her feet confidently on the ground and her shoulders straight. She exuded a sense of self-assurance, a woman who knew exactly what she wanted from life. She'd grown up far beyond what I had envisioned her to be, and I realised that in a way, she'd surpassed me. There was no way I could embody the woman who was her equal. I still felt like a girl, unsure of my own place in the world and uncertain of my own aspirations.

She caught me staring at her, and I looked hastily away.

"I like your jacket," she said suddenly, "it's cute. Didn't you have a red one like that before?"

"Oh," I said, surprised she'd remembered. "Yeah, I did. I like the colour."

"Your favourite, right?"

"It is," I nodded.

"Hey, do you remember all those games of hide and seek?" she asked curiously.

Her friendly conversation had lulled me into a state of comfort, but now, with her mention of our games, my pulse sped up again.

"Um... yes, I think I do," I said hesitantly. She fixed her gaze on me once again, her eyes piercing, and I felt a sudden vulnerability, as if she could see through the layers I had carefully constructed.

"You were always so good at hiding," Natalie remarked with a warm smile. "Remember that time you got in trouble for climbing on the roof of the sports utility shed?"

Even in my nervous state, she got another smile out of me. "Oh that. Yes, I did climb up there. I did it to impress you."

I froze as the admission slipped from my lips. I hadn't intended to reveal the depth of my feelings for her in any way. As long as we kept the conversation neutral, I had convinced myself that everything would be fine.

"I was impressed," she confessed softly. "You were always so clever at hiding, and that time in the shed, the only one who managed to find you was me."

A fusion of emotions surged within me, leaving me momentarily speechless. I searched for an appropriate response, my mind racing to find the right words.

"And the time in the woods," she continued, her gaze never leaving mine. "I found you there too."

My heart skipped a beat, and I felt a mixture of excitement and trepidation. How vividly I remembered that moment, when our hiding spots had aligned and we had shared a secret refuge in the depths of the forest. I remained cautious, unsure of how much I should reveal.

"Do you remember that?" She asked. Her eyes studied me carefully. I paused nervously, anxious over how to evade her question. She had me cornered, and she knew it.

"Yes," I replied, my voice filled with ambiguity. "I remember... parts of it."

"Parts?" Natalie asked, and I knew then that she was teasing me.

"You hid beside me," I finally admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. "We were right by that stream."

A soft smile tugged at the corners of her lips, and I held my breath, waiting for her reaction.

"I remember that too," she said softly, her words filled with a sense of sentimentality. "It was one of my favourite days, I think."

"Why is that?" I found myself asking, astonished at my own bravery.

A mischievous glint danced in her eyes as she replied, "Some... interesting things happened."

She was definitely teasing me.

"Like what?" I inquired, unable to help myself.

"Oh, lots of things," with a nonchalant wave of her hand, she dismissed my question, her grin widening. "It was always interesting when you were there."

I smiled again and felt a small part of me warm to her.

"I thought you had forgotten about it," I admitted.

Her expression softened, and she reached out to gently touch my arm. "Forgot what?" she asked, her voice filled with a blend of confusion and sincerity.

"Well... those two summers we spent together..." I trailed off, looking away.

"I didn't forget, Erin," a look of surprise crossed her face before being replaced with a gentle smile. "In fact, after you left, I even tried to get your phone number."

My eyes widened in disbelief, my voice wavering between shock and excitement. "What?"

"I asked the counsellor for your number after we said goodbye. I had forgotten to ask you in person," she revealed, a hint of disappointment evident in her voice. "But she wouldn't give it to me; they weren't allowed too, I guess. I was pretty crushed, though."

I stared at her, my heart fluttering with a newfound glimmer of hope. If she had felt crushed... it meant... well, it had to mean that my presence had meant something to her. Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance.

"Oh," I replied, my voice filled with surprise and regret. "I had no idea. I would have given it to you. I didn't know that you wouldn't be returning to the camp the following year. I truly believed I would see you again."

"I did too," her gaze softened, and she spoke with a touch of wistfulness. "But then my family moved. I thought about you all the time. I always wondered if you had gone back to Rowlands."

"I did." A medley of emotions washed over me as I confessed. "I went back the following year, and the year after that as well. I suppose I held onto the hope that you would show up again."

"Really?" she asked, her voice filled with genuine surprise.

I couldn't help but chuckle nervously. "Are you surprised?" I questioned, my voice laced with uncertainty. "I had a really big... well, big hopes for that summer. I had a lot of fun at Rowlands."

She could sense my discomfort, but instead of backing away, the energy between us seemed to intensify, drawing us closer together.

"I enjoyed it too, Erin," she whispered, her voice carrying a subtle undertone that spoke of deeper feelings. And in that moment, I couldn't deny the growing connection between us—the undeniable spark that had been ignited in the past and now danced in the present.

"Yeah," I stammered nervously, my voice barely above a whisper. My keys were digging into my hand, and I realised I had unintentionally pressed myself against the car. Her smile widened, and she tilted

her head to the side, an inviting gesture that drew me in further. There was something inviting about the way she stood, and I felt myself lured into the trap of her eyes, my heart racing in response.

There was a ferocity to the air I couldn't put my finger on—a restless, untamed energy that crackled between us, barely concealed by the veil of politeness we stubbornly upheld. Or perhaps it was me who upheld it, because I felt my armour disintegrating within the force of her presence, breaking me down little by little.

She was so close, and the memory of her washed over me, every detail as it once was when we were little girls. The proximity sent my senses reeling, my palms pressing against my sides in an attempt to steady myself, though my heart thudded with wild abandon. Her head dipped down, and her lips met mine in a tender kiss.

Emotions surged within me, a tumultuous wave crashing against the shores of my heart. I could feel her drawing me closer, her hands encircling me, pulling me into her embrace. The warmth between us grew, intensifying until it reached its zenith, bursting forth in a crescendo of pent-up longing that could no longer be contained.

The kiss deepened, and I surrendered myself to the sensations that enveloped me. Her touch was electrifying, her hand threading through my hair, and then tracing a path down my shoulder, ever so slowly, until it settled gently on the curve of my waist. It burned against my skin, searing through the fabric of my jeans, igniting a fire deep within me.

With a gradual, unhurried retreat, she pulled away, and I blinked open my eyes, my head spinning with a whirlwind of emotions.

She gazed at my flushed cheeks with a knowing smile, her eyes tender and filled with affection. Slowly, she reached out, her fingers gently brushing a stray strand of hair behind my ear. The soft touch sent a delightful shiver down my spine, and my heart fluttered in response.

"Now, do you remember when I kissed you in those bushes?" she asked cheekily.

To my surprise, I laughed. "How could I forget?"

"I wanted to remind you," she grinned.

I blushed. "You have, Natalie."

"You don't seem to recall the other one, though. The one under the—"

"Apple tree?" I finished.

"Oh, she does remember," Natalie said, smirking. "And here I thought I'd have to remind you of that too."

She paused, looking at me contemplatively, and I thought I detected a faint anxiety in her eyes.

"Erin Collins," she said slowly, and I immediately felt another wave of warmth wash over me at the sound of my name.

"Y—yes?" I asked.

"Could you please do me the honour of giving me your number?"

I stared at her. "My... number?"

"Well, I think I've waited long enough," she said playfully.

"I know, but... I didn't think you were serious," I said, startled. "I mean, we were just kids... I didn't think you..."

"I don't go around kissing waitresses if that's what you're asking. I make an exception for ones that went to Rowlands, though."

"I know, but I mean, I didn't think..." I was flustered again and unable to verbalise my thoughts. The kiss had astonished me, but the fact that she'd still be interested floored me further.

"What's wrong?" she asked, and I immediately recognised that same vulnerability she'd displayed so long ago when she'd whispered her question in my ear.

"Nothing, I'm just surprised... I'm... I mean... it's been so long... I..."

"Oh," she said, her voice suddenly subdued. "I understand. I thought—ah, never mind."

"No, no," I said hastily. "I want too—I'm just amazed; I didn't think... I didn't think you'd ever still feel... well, we were eleven, or twelve, and... that we could still... be the same... have the same... you know..." I stammered, too embarrassed to continue.

She looked at me for a moment, and then a slow smile crept over her face. She cocked her head to the side, her eyes teasing.

"Have you seen yourself lately?" she asked. "Shortage of mirrors in your house, maybe?"

I laughed. "That's a terrible line!"

She grinned. "I know. So is '*I want you to build me a chocolate door.*' But I never said my flirting had improved. My ability to catch you, however, has. So, that number, please?"

I pulled out my purse, unable to believe what I was doing.

"Actually," she interrupted. "Forget it. What are you doing right now?"

"Now?"

"Yes. You must be starving, serving people delicious food all night."

I laughed again. "You are really bad at this."

"You're laughing. I'm doing something right," she smirked.

I blushed. "But you just ate!" I tried to protest.

"Are you kidding? I'd make myself to eat this car just so you would spend your time with me. Besides, I'd much prefer if you were my date, as opposed to my waitress."

I blushed again at the word date.

"Oh, is... is that what this is?"

"Absolutely. Is that a yes?"

I paused.

"Yes, that is a yes," I laughed.

"Excellent!"

"One last thing, though," I said, swiftly trying to build up my courage. "I wanted to answer something you asked me... a while ago. I... I did like you, Natalie. A lot," I added shyly.

Her face softened. Then the familiar sparkle burst back into her eyes. "I'd be open to a repeat of that summer, if you're interested."

"All of it?" I asked, startled.

"Every single thing. I don't want to let this slip away again."

I grinned, my heart filled with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. This was a new beginning, an opportunity to rewrite the story that had been left unfinished all those years ago.

"So where is this date?"

"I know a place, but promise me you won't be hiding from me any longer. My seeking abilities are not what they used to be."

"I promise," I laughed and said, "But only if you agree to improve your cheesy pickup lines."

She nodded and answered me with a kiss.

The End